

# Nicodemus' Secret

## John 3:1-17

by Reverend Sir Knight Dr. Christopher D. Rodkey

This passage of scripture has two of the most famous lines from the Bible. First, "you must be born again" and second, "for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, and whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." These two phrases are so well-known that they are part of regular conversation between Christians, as in, someone asking if they are "born again" or describing themselves as a "born again Christian" or people holding up John 3:16 signs at football games.

We all know that often these two statements are meant to be exclusionary rather than inclusive statements of love. When Jesus says that you must be born again, we often make an assumption that Jesus is probably speaking to Nicodemus about a small group of people being saved. When Jesus says that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life, very often it is not the everlasting life that is emphasized or celebrated, but instead the focus is upon the exclusion of much of the world in this great statement. While I want to resist the exclusive nature of these statements, it's hard to ignore them.

It would be helpful for us to talk about the various sub-groups of Jews that were important during the time of Jesus, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. If you know your Bible and Bible history, these terms are probably familiar to you. The Pharisees were very legalistic and political, and the Bible often characterizes them as a conservative group that sought to follow their religion to the letter of the law. The Sadducees were an opposing group to the Pharisees and were more entrenched in the political machine of Jewish culture; the Sadducees were often the tax collectors and the political administrators on behalf of the Jewish priests.

There is another group called the Essenes. The Essenes were a mysterious group, and some of the speculation is that many of the Dead Sea Scrolls found in a cave in a place called Qumran were writings collected by the Essene community. The Essenes, some today believe, practiced a ritual of being initiated into their group by ritually burying a person while he was still alive and then resurrecting the person in ritual. The symbolism is that the initiate dies to their previous life and is born again. Those who were full members of the group were considered the "living" and those outside of the group were considered to be the "dead."

Some have speculated that John the Baptist was a member of this Essene group, who were mostly secretive. The theory is that John the Baptist began preaching and practicing a kind of "second birth" ritual through water baptism outside of the

Essene Community, making public a ritual that was before only known to the Essenes in secret.

There is further suggestion that Jesus was either a part of this Essene community or may have been initiated into the group and then left, and leaving, he began preaching some of the secret teachings and ideas of the Essenes to everyone instead of just a select few. Some of the stories of Jesus are opened up in new ways if one considers this to be true. For example, the raising of Lazarus would have been symbolic of Jesus restoring life to someone who was considered spiritually dead. (Or when Jesus says his famous line, "let the dead bury their own dead" [Matthew 8:21-22], this statement reflects an Essene belief; those outside of the sect are dead anyway, and death is an essential part of the outsiders' culture of death.) Some of these lines of thinking are esoteric or highly speculative, but is not all Biblical hermeneutics speculative in some way?

So keeping this in mind, in this passage of scripture, we encounter Nicodemus who was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin or a judge. The Pharisees were a group who did not like the Essenes, and the Essenes did not like the Pharisees, but in the Gospel of John, Nicodemus encounters Jesus and asks him questions, trying to trick him. The story ends not revealing whether Nicodemus immediately accepted or rejected Jesus, but Jesus took Nicodemus seriously and gave him two of the most important of all of his teachings, given to a member of a religious and political sect that Jesus, whether he was an Essene or not, would not have typically entertained, because the Pharisees would have been seen as the enemy.

We do not find Nicodemus until later in the story, on two occasions. In John 7:45ff., Nicodemus was accused by the insiders of the Pharisees of being under Jesus' influence when he demanded that Jesus be treated fairly. The Pharisees passed off Nicodemus as being too friendly to Jesus, because they were both from the same area, saying, "Surely there is no prophet in Galilee" (John 7:52-53). We encounter Nicodemus again in the Gospel of John, 19:39ff. when Nicodemus came to the dead body of Jesus, bringing burial spices including myrrh, one of the spices brought by the three wise men, and Nicodemus then ritually prepared Jesus' corpse for burial and laid it in the tomb.

It would seem that Jesus made a convert out of Nicodemus as perhaps a distant admirer of Jesus but as someone who came after Jesus in an accusatory way. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus made a sharp turn in his thinking after hearing Jesus say the words "you must be born again." Nicodemus perhaps knew that Jesus had initiated him into the secret teachings of the Essene community and understood what Jesus was saying more than the disciples who were following Jesus around. In other words, Nicodemus was a Jew whom the disciples, as working class fishermen, would not have ever accepted, partially because the Pharisees (the sect with which Nicodemus was affiliated) despised the mainstream Jewish working class.

Regardless, in the scriptures we find that Nicodemus understood Jesus' words and later came to prepare Jesus' body with one hundred pounds of embalming material,

an inordinate amount of expensive spices, because he knew that Jesus was truly the only begotten son that is spoken of in John 3:16. In fact, Nicodemus was the first to hear and then the first to believe the famous words of John 3:16. Nicodemus tended to the deceased body of Christ while the other disciples were in hiding and afraid. Nicodemus somehow got the hint that Jesus did not mean that eternal life was just a metaphor or a figure of speech but that He was about to enact a raising of the dead that universally follows from the resurrection of Jesus himself from the grave.

These teachings of Jesus-that you must be born again and that God loves the world so much that he gave His son-were like a secret message given in a secret code by Jesus to Nicodemus, and they are handed down now to us through scripture. Somehow Nicodemus made the connections that no one else really did. The question posed to us now is, "What we are going to do with this information?"

Christians are often in the habit of, as I said before, focusing upon the exclusionary words and tone of these teachings, believing that one must be "born again" in the exact same way that they are, baptized in a certain way, and voting in a certain way if one is to truly be a Christian. Further, citing the famous John 3:16, many Christians believe that if you do not believe in Jesus in the exact same way as they do, one cannot be a legitimate Christian. Churches that nationally protest funerals, local Christians who protest high school musicals, and Christians and preachers everywhere who shun members of their own families and communities are all examples to which we can all relate as practices of exclusion.

We need to read the line after John 3:16 which follows like this. Verse 16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." Now verse 17, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him." Those who choose not to believe are condemned already, because they have not experienced the resurrection of being born again in the first place, but Jesus' resurrection invites new believers into the resurrection, a resurrection only understood by a few before and now accessible to all.

The bottom line for this teaching is that Nicodemus understood the resurrection as a resurrection not just for some but for many, and among those for whom Jesus came to die was Nicodemus himself who humbled himself and publicly spoke for and was ridiculed for his support of Jesus. When everyone else bailed on Jesus at the end, this outsider came to prepare the body of Christ for a resurrection that would invite new people into the secret for thousands of years to come.

So the question left for us is: Are we ready to let the secret out?

Reverend Sir Knight Dr. Christopher D. Rodkey is Pastor of St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Dallastown, Pennsylvania, a member of Hermit Commandery No. 24 in Lebanon, Pennsylvania and resides at 237 W. Main St., Dallastown, PA 17313. He can be contacted at [cdrodkey@yahoo.com](mailto:cdrodkey@yahoo.com).

---